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AUTHOR Sanacore, Joseph
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ABSTRACT

An important priority of educators is to modify the school structure so that "at-risk" learners can be treated as all other students are treated. One way of sending a positive message to all students is to organize classrooms heterogeneously. Intra-class grouping is a source of help when it emphasizes cooperation among learners and highlights the importance of each person's contributions. An effective way of facilitating students' learning is to focus on important concepts. This approach provides students with opportunities to apply their own personal and academic backgrounds to the concepts that are highlighted, to decide which resources they will use in the units of study, and to interpret information through their growing perspectives. Since proficient readers are almost as likely as remedial readers to have weaknesses with higher-order literacy, it makes sense to stimulate this type of literacy development among all students. An eighth-grade English class (in a school that had recently gone through significant detracking) used a curriculum that was structured by themes and concepts. Throughout a 3-week unit on prejudice, class activities offered higher-order thinking opportunities to all students. One way of helping all students to have positive experiences with content area textbooks is to complement their reading efforts with a variety of study techniques, including SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review). Helping at-risk learners to be a genuine part of the mainstream while not lowering standards for the other students will increase opportunities for equal access to learning. (RS)

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Support At-Risk Learners as We Support All Learners

Dr. Joseph Sanacore

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What does it mean to be at risk? Both the media and the professional literature remind us often of the many dimensions of being at risk, including academic failure, drug addiction, alcohol abuse, HIV infection, teenage pregnancy, and crime. The December 1992/January 1993 issue of Educational Leadership focuses on the theme "Students at Risk." In the "Overview" of this issue, editor Ron Brandt describes the glaring social inadequacies that make up these students' backgrounds, and he discusses the need to give these learners special attention so they can succeed in school.

Interestingly, this potential mismatch between at-risk students' backgrounds and their school expectations are at the heart of Henry Levin's definition of being at risk. According to Levin (Restructuring Brief, May 1992), at-risk learners are those learners who probably will not succeed in school because they lack the type of experiences in their community, family, and home that the school expects for success. Levin believes that "at-riskness" is not an inherent part of these students; rather, these learners are caught in an at-risk context, which includes a school whose current structure does not accommodate their needs.

As educators, one of our most important priorities is to modify the school structure by treating these students as we treat all students. This appears to be a lofty goal, but the closer we come to attaining it the greater are our chances of helping these learners become successful. Moving in this direction means that we maintain the global intent of helping

all students achieve success while we act in specific ways that are well-matched with learners' needs and wishes. Developing this sense of mission takes time and requires the support of study groups, faculty meetings, inservice workshops, and parental discussions. When the mission is clarified, teachers and administrators have better direction for pursuing a variety of approaches that reinforce success for all students.

Organizing instruction

One way of sending a positive message to all students is to organize classrooms heterogeneously. This approach establishes equity as it supports equal access to learning. It also replaces traditional remedial instruction which has not helped our at-risk learners become proficient readers and writers.

Since heterogeneous classrooms usually translate into a wide range of ability, achievement, and interest levels, teachers need help in structuring learning activities that provide all students with opportunities for success. Intra-class grouping (not including long-term ability grouping) is a source of help when it emphasizes cooperation among learners and highlights the importance of each person's contributions. Among the useful grouping patterns are literature circles, sharing meetings, shared reading, strategy groups, and skill groups. These intra-class groups are described in one of my recent articles (Reading and Writing Quarterly, summer 1992).

For example, literature circles involve four or five students, last between 2 days and a week, and can be adapted to both elementary and secondary school settings. Literature circles are primarily intended for helping students think profoundly about books so that the books become a major part of their lives. The teacher's general roles include giving frequent opportunities for reading a diversity of materials, encouraging more than one interpretation of text, and supporting risk-taking. According to Jerome Harste, Kathy Short, and Carolyn Burke (Creating Classrooms for Authors, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1988), the teacher also selects several literary works, motivates students to choose books independently, or works with individuals to select materials. After introducing these resources to the entire class through booktalks, students are given opportunities to browse the resources and to become part of a literature circle. Those who decide to join usually choose a group that matches their literary interest (not ability level). Then they read their book and talk about it in their literature circle. They also can meet to discuss the part of the book they completed the previous day, and they can decide cooperatively which sections to complete for the next group discussion. Throughout these activities, the teacher can serve as a facilitator, leader, or member; however, as students demonstrate ease with the operation of literature circles, they should be encouraged to accept more responsibility.

Literature circles and other grouping formats complement whole-class and individual activities. They also reinforce

to all students that they can achieve cooperatively and equitably. As teachers and administrators, we should support such practices since they demonstrate that we value the worth of every student's contribution. This profound recognition can stir learners' emotions, raise their energy levels, and give them the impetus to continue their journey toward successful lifetime literacy learning.

Focusing on concepts

Regrettably, this journey is not always a smooth one because our students are often bombarded with too much information. The knowledge explosion of the post-Sputnik era accompanied by surging technological advances have led to an enormous quantity of information. Our students, therefore, are expected to deal with a mass of factual content, and we are supposed to help them determine the difference between important and unimportant information. Subject area teachers are especially pressured when guiding students through this maze of general-world and content-specific knowledge.

An effective way of facilitating students' learning is to focus on important concepts. This approach provides students with opportunities to apply their own personal and academic backgrounds to the concepts that are highlighted, to decide which resources they will use in the units of study, and to interpret information through their growing perspectives.

For example, if the concept of good and evil is the focus of study, the teacher might engage the class in a brainstorming activity that elicits their direct and vicarious experiences with the concept. Students' responses may be written on the chalkboard and in their notebooks and may be organized by means of a structured overview, semantic map, or semantic feature analysis. As students visualize the worth of their ideas in connection with the contributions of their peers, their self-esteem, personal interest, and energy level probably will be enhanced.

The teacher can support this momentum by introducing books about good and evil, such as Robert Cormier's The Chocolate War and William Golding's Lord of the Flies. These introductions can take the form of booktalks which are effective ways of whetting readers' appetite for young adult and traditional literary works. Successful booktalks typically include the following ingredients: (1) Be well-prepared for the talk so that eye contact is easily maintained with the audience. (2) Arrange books so that they can be shown during the talk, and avoid confusion by including important information on a card at the back of each book. (3) Articulate excerpts that represent the tone and style of the books. (4) Present a variety of resources throughout the school year rather than stress a small number of themes. (5) Use different genres and formats, including poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and short film. (6) Maintain records of materials that are presented so a comparison can be made of the before and after circulation figures on the

materials. These suggestions are adapted from Mary Chelton's article in the April 1976 School Library Journal and from Kenneth Donelson and Alleen Nilsen's Literature for Today's Young Adults (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1989).

When students' appetites are sufficiently whetted, they should have opportunities to read The Chocolate War, Lord of the Flies, or another source concerning the concept of good and evil. A revolving classroom library representing the different themes or concepts to be covered during the school year should be easily accessible to students, thereby supporting their efforts to successfully choose, read, and appreciate books concerning the unit of study. As students become involved in individual conferences, literature circles, whole class discussions, or other approaches to learning, they will grasp aspects of the intended concepts that are personally important to them and that are linked to their background knowledge. They also will gain insights from the collective interpretations of their peers. The point to be made here is that a heterogeneous environment that is organized with flexible instructional groups and oriented toward broad curricular concepts can promote solid learning events that highlight individuals' strengths, interests, firsthand experiences, and learning preferences. This environment is especially effective for at-risk students since it provides them with positive peer-role models, enriches them with varied social contacts, and rewards them with beneficial academic experiences. The success of heterogeneity, of course, depends on administrators and

teachers who are risk-takers and who are committed to the belief that all students should have equal access to a school's offerings.

Stimulating higher-order thinking

Not surprisingly, having equal access to knowledge provides students with opportunities to think at different levels of understanding. Thus, at-risk learners can engage in a variety of activities with their peers, including activities that nurture higher-order thinking.

By definition, higher-order thinking is sometimes described narrowly and sometimes broadly. At the least, it involves critical thinking, creative thinking, and metacognitive processes. In "Chapter 10" of Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1985), Robert Ennis provides a working definition for critical thinking. He considers it to be reasonable, reflective thought that focuses on making decisions about what to believe or do. This definition involves dispositions (e.g., using and mentioning credible sources) and abilities (e.g., analyzing arguments and making inferences). Similarly, my view of creative thinking supports personal, reflective responses to a learning context. For example, given the opportunity to select their own books and to read them at their own comfortable pace, students are more apt to respond poignantly to their books and, with guidance

and direction, to think beyond the authors' ideas. Both critical and creative thinking need metacognitive support, which concerns the conscious awareness and control of thinking processes and also involves the monitoring and resolving of obstacles to understanding. What is particularly important about higher-order thinking is that virtually everyone can benefit from it. According to Anthony and Ula Manzo (Literacy Disorders: Holistic Diagnosis and Remediation, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich,1993), average and poor readers are almost as likely as proficient readers to have strengths with higher-order literacy, and proficient readers are almost as likely as remedial readers to have weaknesses with higher-order literacy. Thus, it makes sense to stimulate this type of literacy development among all students.

Recently, I observed an eighth grade English class for three consecutive weeks at a school where I serve as a consultant. This school has gone through significant detracking, with English classes organized heterogeneously. The curriculum is structured by themes and concepts, and the students were focused on the theme of prejudice.

Initially, the teacher engaged students in a dynamic brainstorming session which motivated them to reveal their personal and vicarious experiences with prejudice. As individuals responded, she organized their contributions by means of a semantic map on the chalkboard. Not surprisingly, these contributions represented a range of experiences, from viewing films and reading books about prejudice to encountering its

devastating effects firsthand. Students' responses led to a restructuring of the map to include four categories: examples of prejudice, stated reasons for prejudice, implied reasons for prejudice, and logic underlying prejudice.

When students' emotions and intellect were piqued, the teacher presented two short booktalks related to Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird and Ruth Minsky Sender's The Cage. During the talks, she excerpted and highlighted aspects of the books that concerned prejudice. Afterward, she mentioned that everyone would be reading in class during the next several weeks. She also indicated that students could read the books used in the booktalks, or they could choose another source about prejudice. The classroom library had multiple copies of key resources, including fiction and nonfiction books, poetry collections, and magazines.

Before students selected and began reading their resources, the teacher established two activities related to the reading and placed them on the chalkboard near the semantic map: "First, as we read, we will reflect on how prejudice is treated or demonstrated in our resource. We will recognize examples of prejudice, identify stated reasons for it, infer implied reasons for it, and judge the logic underlying it. Second, we will add our reflections (in a different color chalk) to the original semantic map, thereby showing how much we have learned about this concept."

During the next several weeks, the students and teacher read silently at their desks. The teacher also varied this

approach to prevent potential boredom and to motivate students to remain focused. Specifically, she revealed her own reflections about her book by selecting specific parts of it and thinking aloud about the examples and reasons for prejudice as well as the faulty logic underlying it. She then added her reflections to the semantic map and reminded students to add their own contributions from their readings. At times, this sensitive teacher met with individuals and provided metacognitive guidance as she helped them monitor their progress and remove comprehension obstacles.

As students completed their reading, the teacher provided closure by reviewing the semantic map with the class and highlighting the tremendous growth that had taken place. She then gave the class options for a related assignment. Students were expected to complete one of the following outcomes: (1) Write a miniresearch paper highlighting some of the categories on the semantic map. (2) Compose a short story or a collection of poems creatively demonstrating some of the same categories. (3) Think beyond the author's ideas by responding in writing to two of the following groups of questions: A. If I were the author, how would I have approached the problem? What would I have learned about myself from my approach to the problem? B. What difficulties would I have experienced in dealing with the problem? How would I have dealt with these difficulties? What would I have learned about myself from the ways in which I dealt with these difficulties? C. Would I have been successful in dealing with the problem? Why? D. Beyond these

experiences, what additional challenges would I have encountered as the author, for example, my personal lifestyle versus the problem to be researched? (These questions were adopted from my article in the January 1988 Journal of Reading.) (4) Create a project about prejudice that was influenced by your reading and related class discussion. You may use a videotape, audiotape, painting, drawing, dance, drama, or a combination of these or other approaches.

Throughout this unit on prejudice, the building principal and language arts coordinator visited the class each week to informally observe, to browse, to engage in reading, and to offer praise and encouragement to the students and teacher. As a special treat, the principal and coordinator invited Ruth Minsky Sender to be part of the Arts-in-Education Authors' Program. She made a poignant presentation concerning her books and her direct experiences with the Holocaust. Students not only were inspired by her presentation but also were well-prepared with profound questions. As an observer and a consultant, I appreciated the different higher-order thinking opportunities afforded all students. Interestingly, I was unable to differentiate between at-risk students and other learners.

Using content area resources effectively

Organizing flexible intra-class groups, emphasizing conceptual learning, and nurturing higher-order thinking are effective ways of increasing students' chances of success.

Although competent, caring teachers support these approaches, they regrettably revert to using content area textbooks as dominant instructional resources, and these resources are likely to cause frustration for at-risk learners. One way of helping students to have positive experiences with the textbooks is to complement their reading efforts with a variety of study techniques, such as SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review). This technique was developed by Francis Robinson (Effective Study, NY: Harper, 1946), and it can help students improve their comprehension and retention of important information in textbook chapters. For SQ3R to be used independently and effectively by students, it must become automatic and subordinate to the reading/study task. Manzo and Manzo endorse SQ3R but strongly recommend that students practice it under teacher guidance, with the teacher gradually transferring responsibility to students.

During the fall 1993 semester, I was invited to observe one of my graduate students who is a high school social studies teacher. He introduced SQ3R to his heterogeneous class by discussing its value for all students and by modeling its use with the ninth grade textbook. Initially, he applied this study technique to "Chapter 1," using read-alouds and think-alouds. Meanwhile his students followed along at their desks. Then, he asked students to actively apply parts of this technique to the rest of the chapter as he walked about the room and provided individual guidance. Students also were given opportunities to discuss the application of SQ3R and to modify

its use. For example, the "Recite" step seemed mechanistic, so the class cooperatively decided to change it to "Reflect/Recite." During the next several days, the teacher provided about 15 minutes of class time to "Review" the chapter as he monitored students' active application of the study technique. Gradually, individuals became aware that with each review, they understood and remembered more content; this awareness gave them a greater sense of control concerning their studying and reinforced the efficacy of using SQ3R. At the end of the week, the teacher administered a chapter test that was comparable to the goals and the structure of SQ3R. The test results were excellent, which motivated students to continue applying this technique. Realizing that automatic use of SQ3R requires frequent and successful application, the teacher provided class time each month for applying it to textbook chapters and encouraged its use for homework assignments. He also guided students to be flexible with SQ3R, incorporating aspects of classroom discussion, notetaking, dialogue journals, and other supportive approaches. Eventually, learners demonstrated increased levels of proficiency, confidence, and independence with SQ3R.

In addition to textbooks and related study techniques, other resources can be used effectively to support instructional goals across the curriculum. In The New Read-Aloud Handbook (NY: Penguin, 1989), Jim Trelease believes that "flesh-and-blood" novels are a major complement to the content areas and that reading them aloud can enrich the curriculum and make it come

alive. Literature-based materials also increase everyone's chances of visualizing connections beyond the textbook, personalizing subject matter, improving higher-order literacy, gaining important values, and developing the lifetime literacy habit. These outcomes certainly justify the reading of literature-based resources in content area classes, but this practice cannot be employed successfully unless it receives strong support from administrators and teachers. Suggestions for carrying out this practice are included in my column "Supporting a Literature-Based Approach across the Curriculum" (JR, November 1993).

Opportunities, not guarantees

Although we cannot guarantee that any innovation will benefit all students, we can strive to create optimum conditions for success. Thus, helping at-risk learners to be a genuine part of the mainstream while not lowering standards for the other students will increase opportunities for equal access to learning. Realistically, some learners will not take advantage of a school's many offerings, and certain individuals with severe learning disabilities will benefit minimally from these offerings unless substantial inclusion-related services are provided by a special education teacher or a consultant teacher. Nonetheless, as teachers and administrators, we must continue to give every student the best opportunities to succeed so that he or she can become a literate, contributing member

of society.